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ABSTRACT

Over the past 25 years, much educational research in the United States has focused on effective schools. This paper presents findings of a study that examined the characteristics of Japanese education, which is often considered effective by American researchers. It compares features of the Japanese education system to characteristics of effective schools identified by Levine and Lezotte (1990). The Japanese system exhibits the following effective-school traits: a focus on student acquisition of central learning skills; appropriate monitoring of student progress; high, operationalized expectations for students; a productive school climate; salient parent involvement; and practice-oriented staff development. The only difference between Japanese schools and Levine and Lezotte's characteristics of effective schools is that Japanese principals play a limited leadership role. The above five characteristics appear to have a very positive impact on Japanese students' academic performance. However, Japanese education is not necessarily effective because of these technical characteristics. Rather, Japanese schools' effectiveness is due to Japanese culture, history, and social systems. In the past, Japan had a strong need to make schools effective in order to catch up with western countries like the United States. However, it is time for Japan to rethink its very effective school system because Japan is no longer a poor country. One of the agenda of the current educational reform movement is to reduce Japanese students' pressure for studying. (LMI)

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"Effective School Research from Japanese Perspective"

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During the past 25 years, much research has been done on "effective schools" in the United States. Researchers have tried to determine what can make a school more instructionally "effective" and also "ineffective." They have used mostly quantitative methods of analysis with data on students' academic performance and their social circumstance to find out which schools get unordinal results. Then they have investigated what characteristics of these schools affect students' achievement.

This paper will examine the findings of this "effective school" research from the perspective of Japanese education, which is often considered "effective" by American researchers and practitioners. First, this paper starts by reviewing its salient findings. Then, It will argue the applicability of the effective schools research in the cross-national context, in this case, Japanese education.

I. "Effective Schools" Literature Review

Although there were many studies on school effectiveness before the late 1970's, the first attempt which was recognized as the effective school research was presented by Edmonds (1979), Brookover et al. (1979) and Rutter et al. (1979). The following are the factors which they found to have positive impacts on students' achievement: (1) a principal with strong leadership and who is involved in efforts to create better instruction and students' discipline; (2) a safe and orderly school climate; (3) an emphasis on learning basic skills such as language and mathematics; (4) teachers' high expectations of children's ability to pursue high achievement; (5) systematized frequent monitoring of students' achievement; (6) parental cooperation with school. Since Edmonds and others actively disseminated these findings, they were accepted by educational reformers in the United States. The "effective research" became a popular field of educational research and many studies were conducted in the 1980's.

In 1990, Levine and Lezotte, completing a comprehensive review of research on effective schools, summarized the following characteristics of unusually effective schools. (1) Productive school climate and culture; (2) Focus on students' acquisition of central learning skills; (3) Appropriate monitoring of student progress; (4) Practice-oriented staff development at the school site and outstanding leadership; (5) Salient parent involvement; (6) Effective instructional arrangements and implementation; (6) High operationalized expectations and requirements for students.

II. Do the effective schools findings explain the effectiveness of Japanese schools?

It is repeatedly asserted by a number of scholars that Japanese have made remarkable success in student achievement. Almost all Japanese 18 year olds are able to read newspapers. Internationally organized tests showed that Japanese students performed very well in mathematics and science. Many Japanese believed that this high academic performance made it possible for Japan to succeed in rapid economic growth since the only resource that this small country could have had for development was this highly developed human resource. Here, as the U.S. researchers investigated unordinarily effective schools to identify their characteristics, I would like to examine this unordinarily effective country in education to determine the characteristics which made its educational system so effective by looking at Levine's summary findings.

(1) "Focus on student acquisition of central learning skills"

"Appropriate monitoring of student progress"

"High operationalized expectations and requirements for students"

Many comparative studies on Japanese education found that Japanese schools emphasize learning the basic skills of language and mathematics. The two core subjects are treated much more importantly than other subjects in the Japanese classrooms from the first year of

elementary school to 12. Also, previous research also showed the high utilization of tests and homework in Japanese schools.

There are two most important factors which make teachers emphasize basic academic skills and which make them use tests and homework frequently in their classrooms. One is Japan's centralized curriculum. The Ministry of Education has treated these subjects as core subjects and has influenced actual classrooms instruction strongly. Japanese children are trained to be able to read, write and calculate with a highly standardized curriculum. All teachers are expected to use the textbooks which are officially inspected by the Ministry of Education. Almost all the teachers in Japan use the teachers' guidebooks which are also admitted by the Ministry of Education. Even the textbooks come with tests that make sure students have mastered the subjects. This standardization of curriculum is implemented nationwide. Therefore, the teachers' core role in schools is to keep all their students' achievement above the nationwide standard. Given that most Japanese classes have more than 40 students, Japanese teachers sometimes have to neglect talented students with higher performance to concentrate their efforts on keeping their less talented students above the national standards. The frequent use of tests and homework is another way for teachers to make students study and study.

The second factor which makes Japanese teachers emphasize these basic skills is that they are also core subjects for entrance examinations and they are an important base for the other subjects. This is also the factor which makes teachers utilize tests and homework frequently. As well known even by foreigners, Japanese student life is sometimes called "examination hell." Most students have to get through an entrance examination when they enter senior high schools. Some students take entrance examinations in order to gain admission to private elementary schools or junior high schools. Since what school (especially university) one graduates may dictate the degree of success in life by influencing choice of occupation and

spouse, entrance examinations are some of the goals for Japanese students. Recognizing that once students graduate from school, it is very hard for them to change their life course in Japan, students make every effort to go to "better" schools and eventually "famous" universities. Teachers, parents and even neighbors cooperate to create the best conditions for students to study for entrance examinations. Consequently there is no wonder that basic academic skills or higher order curriculum are emphasized and tests and homework are utilized frequently in Japanese class rooms.

(2) "Productive school climate"

Levine (1992) described a productive school as one with an "orderly environment," "staff commitment to a shared and articulated mission focused on achievement," "staff cohesion, collaboration, consensus, communications and collegiality," "staff input into decision making," and "school-wide emphasis on recognizing positive performance." I would like to examine Levine's findings in the context of Japanese schools.

Discipline is a key element which most Japanese teachers try to establish and maintain in their classrooms. In general, discipline is emphasized not only in schools but also in society as a whole since it is deeply rooted in Confucianism and the cultural background of Japan.

A crime free school environment is certainly an important part of the school climate suggested by the effective schools literature. As for crime in schools, the problem in Japanese schools is far less than that of U.S. schools. Although Japanese recently have become very concerned about violence and the bad behavior of some students, compared to the U.S., they are still relatively minor. For example, student drug use is still rare. Very few students and teachers throughout Japan feel their lives are in danger. Again, this situation is true not only in schools but also in other parts of Japanese society. Although Japanese have recently

become concerned about the increase in crime, still we can see large difference in crime rates between the U.S. and Japan for all kinds of crimes.

"Staff commitment to a shared and articulated mission focused on achievement" and "school-wide emphasis on recognizing positive performance" are clearly characteristics of Japanese schools. Teachers share their views that a school's fame fully depends on what advanced schools they can send their students. After the entrance examination season every year in March, magazines report how many students from each high school passed the examinations of famous universities. They report even the rankings of high schools based on these numbers. Sometimes, local newspapers report all the names of the students who passed examinations. This publicity forces teachers automatically to "commit to a shared and articulated mission focused on achievement." This phenomenon strongly influences the next level down also because the number of students who pass the examinations of better high schools determines the fame of junior high schools and also the teachers who work there. Therefore, "school-wide emphasis on recognizing positive performance" does not explain the Japanese situation exactly, because it is "nation-wide."

"Staff cohesion, collaboration, consensus, communications and collegiality" and "staff input into decision-making" are also characteristics of the Japanese schools. Again, it is true not only for the schools but also the Japanese workplace generally. Many studies on the Japanese style of management pointed out the emphasis on the consensus building and communication among staff members in the Japanese work place. As in the famous Quality Control (QC) movement of Japanese factories, the staff input is welcomed by management in Japan. Japanese schools simply follow this rule. Typically the last place for decision making in schools is in staff meetings. Although the principal has the power of decision legally, there is almost no principal who can neglect the decisions of staff meetings. Sometimes this process of building consensus and Japanese style bottom up decision making

can be inefficient because it takes much time. However, once an idea diffuses among staff members through this process, the actual decision can be implemented smoothly and efficiently.

This principal's lack of power in Japanese schools is only one part which contradicts the effective school research findings. Although the principal's strong leadership is a core finding of the research, the role of the Japanese principal is very limited. This tendency is also not only true in schools but also in Japanese society in general. Japanese social systems usually work without a strong leadership. Even the word "leadership" is perceived differently in the two societies. A good leader in the U.S. is a person who can make the right decision and who can persuade his or her staff to work for the decision. In Japan, a good leader is a boss who allows his or her staff to decide and take responsibility for the staff's decision. In this culture, the leadership which the effective school research suggested does not work. This is one example that addresses the limitation of the cross-national application of the effective school research.

(3) "Salient parent involvement"

Japanese mothers of school children are often called "Kyoiku Mama" which can be directly translated as "Education Mom." They make every effort to have their children study more, hoping their young sons and daughters eventually go to famous universities and get better jobs. They do not hesitate to sacrifice other things. They save money to send their kids to "juku" or cram schools and are willing to change their daily life pattern to adjust their children's study schedule. Especially families with a student who will take the entrance examination in one year have to endure their life. (Students in this situation are called "Jukensei" in Japanese which can be directly translated as "Examination Student." However, there is no English word for this as far as I know.) The family does not take vacation trips

because they cannot leave the Jukensei alone at home. The family members try their best to keep quiet so that the Jukensei can concentrate on studying in the tiny Japanese house.

How can such parents keep quiet about the things going on in their children's school? Every school has a Parents and Teachers Association (PTA), which lets parents actively be involved in school activities. Parents are a demanding but also cooperative group for teachers who pursue high academic achievement of students. Many school decisions are based on consultation with parents, at least with executive members of PTAs.

Thus, Japanese education is very effective because of the several factors which the effective school research suggested. So, does it mean that the effective school research is proved to be true cross nationally? In a sense, yes. The factors listed above seem to have a very positive impact on Japanese students' academic performance as the effective schools research suggested. However, the fact that Japanese education is effective and Japanese education has several distinct characteristics does not necessarily mean that Japanese education is effective because of these characteristics. As I illustrated, the characteristics are determined by social and cultural factors. The reason that Japanese schools are effective depends not on technical factors which one can change tomorrow, but on Japanese culture, history and social systems. Levine (1992) pointed out that "the correlates constitute a set of characteristics identifying considerations *all or most of which must be addressed* if a school is to be usually effective in producing student achievement." His observation can be interpreted in this way: the factor which can make school more effective is not these independent factors but a strong need of society to make schools effective, which influence at once all the factors suggested by the effective schools research. Japan had a strong need to make schools effective in order to catch up with Western countries like the U.S. Japan has constructed this effective system for more than 100 years. However, it is time for Japan to rethink this very effective school

system because Japan is no longer a poor country. One of the agenda of the current educational reform movement in Japan is to reduce students' pressure for studying.

Hence, the social factor is important to make schools more effective rather than the technical findings of the research. Maybe the U.S. is "at Risk" and has social needs to make schools effective. However, in the U.S., who wants their schools as effective as Japanese schools? It is very crucial to note that academic performance is not the only purpose of schools. Although the Japanese have struggled to construct such an effective educational system, they have realized this fact only recently. Cross national application of the effective school research is possible but can be dangerous because the dependent variable, the measure of effectiveness of schools, is various from culture to culture and from nation to nation.

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